Full contact details
Mr Chris Carter
Study Area Coordinator (Animation)
Film, Screen, Animation
QUT Creative Industries Faculty
Musk Ave
Kelvin Grove QLD 4059
Australia
chris.carter@qut.edu.au
short bio
Chris Carter is the Study Area Coordinator for animation in the School of Media, Entertainment and Creative Arts at the Queensland University of Technology (QUT) in Brisbane Australia. Chris is currently investigating character motion as part of his ongoing practice-led PhD research.

Tze-Yue G. Hu, *Frames of Anime: Culture and Image-Building.* Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2010. 256 pp. ISBN 9622090982

With the rising popularity of anime amongst animation students, audiences and scholars around the world, it has become increasingly important to critically analyse anime as being more than a 'limited' form of animation, and thematically as encompassing more than super robots and pocket monsters. *Frames of anime: Culture and Image-Building* charts the development of Japanese animation from its indigenous roots within a native culture, through Japan's experience of modernity, and the impact of the Second World War. This text is the result of a rigorous study that recognises the heterogeneous and polymorphous background of anime. As such, Tze-Yue has adopted an 'interdisciplinary and transnational' (p. 7) approach to her enquiry, drawing upon face-to-face interviews, on-site visits and biographical writings of animators. Tze-Yue delineates anime from other forms of animation by linking its visual style to pre-modern Japanese art forms and demonstrating the connection it shares with an indigenous folk system of beliefs.

Via the identification of traditional Japanese art forms and their visual connectedness to Japanese animation, Tze-Yue shows that the Japanese were already heavily engaged in what was destined to become anime once technology had enabled its production. Tze-Yue's efforts to connect

traditional Japanese art forms and their artistic elements to contemporary anime reveals that the Japanese already had a rich culture of visual story telling that pre-dates modern animation. She identifies the Japanese form of the magic lantern at the turn of the nineteenth century, *utsushi-e,* as the pre-modern ancestor of Japanese animation, describing it as '*Edo anime*' (p. 43).

Along with *utsushi-e,* the Edo period also saw the woodblock print, *ukiyo-e*, being produced for the rising middle class (p. 32). Highlighting the 'resurfacing' of 'realist' approaches to Japanese art in *ukiyo-e*, Tze-Yue demonstrates the visual connection of *ukiyo-e* and anime in the animated adaptation of Shirow Masamune's 1989 manga titled *Ghost in the Shell* :

> When one glances at Kitagawa Utamaro's (1753-1806) masterpiece, *Women Bathing*, the sleek linear profile of a fully nude female body provides a faint and yet powerful matching remembrance of the lady robot in director Oshii Mamoru anime film, *Ghost in the Shell* (1995), whose perfect-10 naked anatomy, complete with muscles and sinews, stretches the "realist approach" to the maximum. (p. 32)

The coining of the word *manga*, consisting of *man* (casual, free and careless) and *Ga* (picture or drawing), has been attributed to wood cut print artist Katsushika Hokusai (1760-1849) who in 1814, published a collection of drawings and caricatures entitled *Hokusai manga* (p. 102). The visual connection manga and anime share with *ukiyo-e* provides the basis for the argument that anime is simply an extension of Japan's old art forms. Quoting Yamaguchi and Watanabe (1977) and Tsugata (2004), Tze-Yue explains that:

> ..from a Japanese perspective, the new medium is merely an old art form and that the Japanese are already familiar with it. The medium is simply a form of "lines" (sen) and "pictures" (e) that move and in the past it had already been incorporated into *utsushi-e* and other native techniques of art drawing. (p. 60)

Although the cinematic technology that enabled projected images to be shown in rapid succession was introduced to Japan at the end of the 19th century, anime (in respect to its visual style and themes) was not necessarily anything new to the Japanese. Both stylistically and thematically, anime in its pre-cinema form was already very much a part of the Japanese culture. Although we can never truly know, it is interesting to ponder the possibility that animation would have developed in Japan as a natural extension of their existing art forms regardless of the Western influences. Tze-Yue does caution however, that when considering the visual connection anime shares with historical forms of Japanese art, one must remain conscious of the 'spontaneous nationalistic efforts to place rhetorical emphasis on the countries artistic heritage' (p. 10).

Frames of Anime traces the development of anime from its indigenous roots to contemporary

works by examining the implications of the modernisation of Japan, the Second World War and the post-war experience of the Japanese people. Highlighting the importance of a balanced enquiry, Tze-Yue points out that:

> When studying a specific form of animation that comes from a place where its people had achieved modernisation within less than half a century and waged a world war with unimaginable consequences, one cannot afford to be fixated on constructing a one-sided reading and understanding. (p. 166)

The ‘modernisation experience’ leading up to the Second World War was critical to the development of animation in Japan. As Tze-Yue argues, ‘central to the development of the medium was the concurrent innovation and research on Western film technology’ (p. 61). She outlines the development of the photographic film industry highlighting the establishment of the Fuji Film Company as a significant ‘achievement in Japan's modernization’ (p. 62). Interestingly, the accelerated development of the photographic film industry in Japan can be linked to a direct cash injection by the pro-militant government in 1933. This link to ‘pro-militant’ funding enables Tze-Yue to demonstrate why the contents of the short animated films made prior to 1934 had already begun to carry ‘propaganda narratives of the military and rightist sections of the government’ (p. 67). As Tze-Yue's research illustrates, propaganda was something to feature more prominently in animated films as the Second World War progressed.

In Chapter 5, the question is raised as to how Japan emerged from the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki along with other horrific events of the war, challenging the reader to ‘compare the Japanese plight with the rest of Asia which had just emerged from a multi-colonial past and had experienced another “liberator's” acts of horrors and pseudo-promises’ (p. 77). Acknowledging that, along with Japan, other parts of Asia engaged in image-building after the Second World War, Tze-Yue explains that Japan differed from other Asian countries, describing Japan as being in an ‘express-train mode’(p. 78). That is, during the post-war modernisation of Japan, the Japanese people took to the ‘*old* business of image-building and fantastic entertainment’, moving forward with creating all kinds of images (p. 78). The post-World War Two founding of Toei Animation Studio and the subsequent production of *Hakujaden*, also known as *Legend of the White Snake* (1958), furthers Tze-Yue's discussion on the ‘direction of the medium-genre's industrial growth’ (p. 167).

Throughout the text, the author refers to anime as a ‘medium-genre’ (p. 2) based on its unique and recognisable characteristics such as ‘character design, background presentation, origins of storylines, production work practices, channels of distribution, and kind of audienceship’ (p. 3).

From a critical perspective, considering the continued reference throughout the text to anime as ‘the medium-genre’, a wider explanation or justification for the term would have improved the overall discussion. However, Tze-Yue does explain that in the context of this research, anime has been designated as a ‘form of language-medium’ consisting of not only sounds and words but also a ‘larger communicative system of signs’ (p. 2). This explanation helps in understanding how to consider the term ‘medium-genre’ in the context of this discussion. The notion of anime being a form of language-medium is also supported in a later quote of animator Tezuka Osamu where he identifies his approach to anime as the ‘writing of a story with a unique type of symbol’ (p. 101).

Tezuka Osamu is known to millions of Japanese readers as the ‘god of comics’(p. 97) and no study of anime would be complete without including a discussion of his influence on the ‘medium-genre’. As early as the mid-1950s, and prior to moving to the animation medium, Tezuka ‘was reported to be the richest artist in the Kansai region’ (p. 96). This was a testament to Tezuka's success and his revolutionary manga style. Tezuka’s manga was revolutionary in that he changed the typical presentation of comic narrative via a more fluid page layout, regular depiction of sound and the use imagery closely aligned to the conventions of live action cinema. It was Tezuka’s transition into animation that resulted in the development of a new style of animation that incorporated cinematic layout yet limited movement. In discussing the development of Tezuka's ‘limited’ style of animation, Tze-Yue suggests that it was largely due to Tezuka's lack of knowledge of the business and technical production of animation that led to this ‘creative’ style. Tze-Yue clarifies that under the guidance of Tezuka, ‘animated movements and frames found in the *Astro Boy* series were limited and static’ (p. 99). She goes on to suggest that this ‘limited’ style was most likely due to a range of external and internal forces, including tight production schedules, lack of assistance from professional animators, a reliance on the success of his manga and possibly a lack of understanding or respect for the requirements of animated production. There is little doubt that Tezuka’s animation had a profound impact on post-war Japanese animation. His limited style lowered production costs yet remained popular amongst his existing fan base. Consequently, rival television networks and subsequent manga to animation conversions adopted his ‘formulaic form of animation production’ (p. 99).

In light of his success and impact on the development of anime, Tzu-Yue presents the argument that development of Tezuka’s limited style of animation was due to his haste in converting his manga to animation and his neglect for the technical and creative requirements of animation production (p. 99). This argument is difficult to accept, clearly Tezuka had already mastered the representation of time, space and motion in the static medium of manga, it seems only natural for

someone such as Tezuka to accept that this ‘limited’ form of animation could still be visually engaging. In 1988, Miyazaki Hayao put forward his thoughts on Japanese animation, stating that, ‘the main reason that viewers accepted this odd sort of animation is actually because they had been conditioned by the visual language of manga. The elder brother of anime – which had already suffused throughout society’ (Miyazaki, 2009: 76).

This suggests that Tezuka possibly made a deliberate move toward the ‘limited’ styling of his animated production. Although heavily influenced by Disney, is it possible that Tezuka felt he did not need to rely on the use of motion in his animated productions in the way Disney animation had come to? As previously mentioned, the argument put forward by Tze-Yue for Tezuka’s lack of knowledge in animation production is difficult to accept. That is until reading Miyazaki’s 1989 article dedicated to the late Tezuka titled, ‘I parted Ways with Osamu Tezuka When I Saw the ‘Hand of God’ in Him’ (Miyazaki et al, 2009). In the article Miyazaki pays respect to Tezuka for having created Japan's first TV anime series in 1963 titled *Tetsuwan Atom* otherwise known as *Astro Boy*. However, Miyazaki also mentions that due to the rapid economic growth of Japan, TV animation was destined to begin within two or three years with or without the Tezuka influence. This supports Tze-Yue's argument that although Tezuka was a primary figure in the development of anime, and his contribution to the ‘medium-genre’ is significant, it ‘would be short sighted’ to attribute the development to him (p. 98). Miyazaki also attributes the problem of low production budgets to Tezuka, suggesting it was a result of him producing the *Astro Boy* series for as little as 500,000 yen per episode. When discussing Tezuka's knowledge of animation production, Miyazaki does not hold Tezuka in high regard, he explains:

> At one point Tezuka used to go around saying ‘Limited animation's the way to go now. Three frames – just use three frames!’ But limited animation doesn't mean three frames, and anyway after that he turned what he had been saying on its head and started yakking all over the place about how great ‘full animation’ is, but it seemed to me that he didn't have any idea what that meant, either. Similarly, when he went out and bought a rotoscope, we all wound up laughing at him. (Miyazaki et al, 2009: 195)

As Miyazaki suggests, Tezuka possibly didn't fully understand how to correctly depict motion in his animated works. Miyazaki goes on to proclaim that ‘in terms of animation... everything that Mr. Tezuka talked about or emphasised was wrong’ (Miyazaki et al, 2009: 197). Miyazaki points out that Tezuka's lack of understanding was possibly due to there being no one in Japan who could be his teacher and that all of his early works were ‘imitations of Disney’. According to Miyazaki, Tezuka's work in animation can be best understood if thought of as his hobby or ‘something a rich man might do for a diversion’ (Miyazaki et al, 2009:197). In *Frames of Anime,* while acknowledging the

possible lack of knowledge on Tezuka's part, Tze-Yue goes on to suggest that the limited movement in the work of Tezuka could also be linked to the style of the *nō* actor.

It is not that far stretched to consider, that when developing a style of animation unique to Japan, animators such as Tezuka and Miyazaki would be influenced by Japanese traditional performing arts. Just as Disney's 'nine old men' borrowed from the theatre when establishing what was to become the 'twelve principles of [Disney] animation', elements of anime bare similar resemblance to elements of *nō* and *kyōgen* stage-acting, generally known as *nōgaku.* Tze-Yue provides an example from Tezuka's *Astro Boy*:

> Astro Boy's limited and so-called 'stiff' movements in animated television frames, in a way, are similar to the slow acting pace of a *nō* actor. The external spectacle may be resting in an inert pose and mode, but what matters most is the innate psychological state of the character that is being portrayed. (p. 100)

While watching a *nō* performance it becomes obvious that movement is heavily stylised, direct and at times very limited. A *nō* actor allows the audience to engage with the character being portrayed through controlled motion and gesture that departs from other 'realist' approaches. Tezuka is not the only one who appears to have borrowed from the Japanese theatre.

As Tze-Yue (p. 34) reveals, the works of prominent animators Miyazaki Hayao and Takahata Isao bear resemblance to what is known in *nō* theatre as 'the art of *ma*, signifying the science of time and space in storytelling'. Tze-Yue describes the art of *ma* in Miyazaki and Takahata's anime as those moments of 'non-action, rest, pause, feelings of space and time, intervals between events and "silent breath" of the protagonist' (p. 34). These moments of silence act as a form of punctuation. They slow down the pacing of the film, allowing time for the audience to take in what is being communicated and to connect on an emotional level. This suggests that the depiction of movement in Japanese animation has not simply been a by product of lower production costs and a reliance on the nations interest in manga. The Japanese already had a history of exploring variations in timing and space that naturally made its way into the new story telling medium.

In chapter 6, Tze-Yue analyses the animated works of Miyazaki and Takahata further via the interpretive lens of auteur theory. Adopting auteur theory allows Tze-Yue to recognise how Miyazaki and Takahata have used the 'expressive medium of animation in responding to the changing socio-cultural environment of later post-Second World War Japan' (p. 105). She acknowledges the limitations of the auteur model and provides a well-written explanation as to how

auteur theory is applied to the analysis of Miyazaki and Takahata's animation cinema. Identifying that the auteur model is also applied to the marketing and self-promotion of Miyazaki and Takahata, Tze-Yue recognises the need to critically address their ‘auteur status’ (p. 117). Hersubsequent analysis of Miyazaki and Takahata's works is focussed on their collaboration in a studio setting as opposed to the content of their films. Describing this as a ‘historical-industrial’ approach, Tze-Yue manages to place the films of Miyazaki and Takahata in their wider socio-cultural position, highlighting ‘their artistic and economic contributions’ (p. 167) to Japanese animation.

Tze-Yue does not mention Miyazaki's distaste for the term anime, nor his opinions on discussing Japan's anime culture. Yet in 1987 Miyazaki had a strong opinion on the use of the word anime to describe Japanese animation, ‘I frankly despise the truncated word “anime” because to me it only symbolizes the current desolation of our industry’ (Miyazaki et al, 2009: 72). By ‘desolation’ Miyazaki was referring to the issues surrounding mass production and the resulting ‘showiness, nervousness and titillation’(Miyazaki et al, 2009: 72) that had become prevalent in anime in place of thoughts and emotion that could move an audience. Ironically, given the influence Miyazaki has had on the development of the genre, Miyazaki ‘never had any interest in being one who defends, represents, or even analyzes Japan's anime culture’(Miyazaki et al, 2009: 72), instead relegating the discussion of anime to the level of general consumerism.

Frames of Anime: Culture and Image-building expounds the indigenous roots of anime, providing a broader appreciation of the historical and cultural influences that have led to the development of the recognisable visual styles and themes that make up this increasingly popular form of animation. The up font presentation of her theoretical basis for the study clearly articulates Tze-Yue’s critical approach to evaluating the medium-genre. In doing so she is able to make sense of not only the historical impact of Japanese society on the development of anime but also position it within the context of wider international material developments. Tze-Yue not only links contemporary anime to early traditional Japanese art forms via direct aesthetic comparison but also highlights that thematically Japanese art has always pursued the expression of the lived experience of the Japanese people. The introduction of animation provided the Japanese people with a new medium to extend their ongoing creative endeavours of image making. Tze-Yue does well to explain the impact of the Second World War on the development of the medium. She links its development to film technology and experimentation followed by the military support for the medium as it provided a powerful platform for distributing influential propaganda. The post-war era is covered in detail with adequate attention given to the influential works of Tezuka Osamu whose limted animation style and alternative production techniques heavily shaped the future of the medium. From this she

extends into deep analysis of the works of Miyazaki and Takahata concentrating on their approach to animation production in comparison to other types of anime. This is not a text written for anime fans*, Frames of Anime: Culture and Image-building* is a deep scholarly account of the development of anime. There is so much information packed into this study that it is difficult to distil into a review such as this and fully capture everything that Tze-Yue has revealed. This study contributes to the expanding lexicon of Japanese animation theory and is strongly recommended to anyone interested gaining a better understanding of this 'medium-genre', its visual and thematic connection to a rich ancient culture and its continued development throughout the modernisation of Japan.

References

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